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# Associations between university students' beliefs and their learning strategy use

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## Abstract

This study aimed at describing Iranian University EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and exploring how such beliefs might affect the deployment of different cognitive, meta-cognitive, social, and affective language learning strategies. A group of 203 undergraduate learners of English selected randomly from five major Iranian universities consented to participate in the study. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed for the collection of the required data including questionnaire and interview data. Quantitative aspects of learners' beliefs about language learning and their learning strategy use were investigated using the "Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory" and the "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning", respectively. Qualitative data collected through interviews were added to further clarify possible associations. Exploratory factor analyses were carried out to determine emerging underlying categories of beliefs about learning and learning strategies. Descriptive and inferential data analyses indicated that beliefs about language learning were significantly related to language learning strategy use and language proficiency. Language learners' self-efficacy about language learning and "the perceived value of language learning" correlated with the use of all types of learning strategies except meta-cognitive ones, in which the majority of the learners seemed to be weaker. Moreover, items that loaded on the factor of "formal practice" seemed to discourage the use of compensation, affective, social, and functional-practice strategies by learners. The findings of the study and the related discussions point to possible culture specific considerations in the study of beliefs about learning and strategies for language learning. They also sensitize teachers to their learners' preconceived ideas and expectations about learning and give them some clues on how these might affect their pedagogical practices.

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## 1. Introduction and background

In foreign language research and teaching, the necessity to investigate learner's affective variables as a means of explaining differences in one's ability to learn a new language has been emphasized in recent years. Savignon (1983), for example reviewed many affective studies and claimed that affective variables contribute more to the result of foreign or second language learning than do aptitude, intelligence, method of teaching used in the classroom, or time spent learning the language (Cited in Kennedy, Nelson, Odell, and Austin, 2000, p. 279). An

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overwhelming set of variables is implied in considering the affective side of foreign language learning. Affect involves variables such as attitudes, motivation, interests, learners' beliefs, needs, expectations, and prior experiences (Gee, 1999, p.3). Within this complex web of variables are learners' beliefs about language learning.

In the language acquisition context, beliefs have been defined as 'implicit theories' or 'self-constructed representational systems. Understanding learner beliefs in this context is essential, since it has been noted that successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies, which have a facilitative effect on learning. Students can have 'mistaken', uniformed or negative beliefs, which may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Sakalli, 2007), classroom anxiety (Horwitz, et al., 1986), and poor cognitive performance (Reid & Hresko, 1981). For instance, if a student believes that learning a new language is basically translating from or to the new language he/she will spend most of his/her time and effort on using translation strategies in the hope of improving his/her language proficiency. Similarly, a student who believes that language aptitude is the most important key to success in learning a foreign language, and that he or she does not possess the aptitude, may begin language learning with a negative expectation of success.

One of the other variables whose possible contribution to the success or lack of success of FL/SL learners' acquisition has long been stressed in recent research is language learning strategy. Oxford (1990) stated that "learning strategies are important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement" (p.1). Learning strategies can foster learners' autonomy, assist learners in promoting their own achievement in language proficiency (Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003), and lead to the better use of a language. Therefore, a neglect of language learning strategies and beliefs about language learning in different contexts can be a drawback in the facilitation of language learning.

When teachers are unaware of their students' preferences and perceptions, they can not consider them in their teaching activities and classroom practices. In such a condition, teachers can not help students achieve what they expect and look for. The worst consequence of this ignorance is students' disappointment and failure. The objective of this research was to determine language learning strategies employed by the students for practicing and improving their listening skill and to explore their beliefs about language learning in relation to their use of language learning strategies. More specifically, the survey was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are Iranian university EFL learners' beliefs about language learning as measured by a modified form of 'Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)?
- 2) What are the language learning strategies reported by Iranian university EFL learners as measured by 'Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)?
- 3) Is there any relationship between Iranian university EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and their reported language learning strategy use?
- 4) Is there any relationship between EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and their language proficiency as measured by 'Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB)'?

## 2. The Study

The study was a survey of university students' beliefs about language learning and language learning strategies in which the data were collected through standardized questionnaires and follow-up interviews. The population of undergraduate EFL learners studying English for their BA degree at the English Departments of five Iranian universities was the target of the study.

### 2.1. The participants

From the research population, a sample group of 203 undergraduate EFL learners from among 250 students selected through random sampling techniques completed the questionnaires. From these students whose age range was between 19 and 25, 114 (56.20%) ones were majoring in English literature and 89 (44.80%) ones were majoring in English translation. Among them, 116 (57.10%) students were female and 87 (42.90%) students were male. Of 203 students, 45 (22.16%) ones were freshmen, 57 (28.07%) ones were sophomore, 72 (35.46%) ones were juniors and 29 (14.28%) ones were seniors. Participants of this study were selected based on judgement sampling.

## 2.2. *The research instruments*

Three instruments were used in the study: The first instrument was the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI, ESL/EFL version) developed by Horwitz (1987). The second instrument was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, ESL/EFL 7.0 version) designed by Oxford (1990). At the end of both the BALLI and the SILL questionnaires, some open-ended questions were added in order to elicit any additional information or comments from individuals about language learning beliefs and strategy use. The third instrument was Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB) which is a proficiency test. The version of the ESL/EFL BALLI used for this study contained 34 original items plus some open-ended items added by the researcher. The items on the BALLI assessed learners' beliefs in five areas: 1) the difficulty of language learning (6 items), 2) foreign language aptitude (9 items), 3) the nature of language learning (6 items), 4) learning and communication strategies (8 items), and 5) motivation and expectations (5 items). The BALLI was translated into Persian by the researcher. The translated version was revised and confirmed by two of the professors who teach translation courses in the University of Kashan (See Appendix C). Cronbach's alpha reliability of the translated version of the BALLI was 0.68.

The ESL/EFL SILL (7.0 version) was also used in this study to measure the strategy use of some English learners in Iran. The SILL is a self-report questionnaire, and the 50 items in the questionnaire are grouped into six categories of strategies: memory - storing and retrieving information (9 items), cognitive--understanding and producing the language (14 items), compensation -overcoming limitations in language learning (6 items), meta-cognitive - centering and directing learning (9 items), affective - controlling emotions, motivation (6 items), and social - cooperating with others in language learning (6 items). In this study, the SILL contained the 50 original items, plus some open-ended items added by the researcher, which was used for any additional strategies or comments by the participants. Instead of translating the SILL, the researcher used an existing Persian version of the SILL inventory which was used and standardized for Iranian learners by Tahmasebi (1999 reported in Akbari and Hosseini, 2008: 148). Cronbach's alpha reliability of this Persian version was 0.91.

## 2.3. *Procedures*

Before the administration of the instruments, the researcher added six demographic questions including Name, Age, Major, Semester, Average, and Sex (male or female) to the top of the first page of each questionnaire and the proficiency test. To ensure greater accuracy of results, both of the questionnaires (the BALLI and the SILL) were translated into Persian to minimize any possible errors from misunderstanding English. Data were collected during two class hours with the help of their English professors in each of the five mentioned universities. The two questionnaires of the BALLI and SILL were administered at one session and the proficiency test of MELAB was administered at another session. The time-limit for the BALLI, the SILL and the MELAB were respectively 15 minutes, 20 minutes and 90 minutes. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their answers before they started to complete the self-report questionnaires and the test.

## 3. *Data analysis and results*

To attain these goals, both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were performed. The quantitative analysis involved several statistical procedures: (1) factor analysis was performed on the data collected by the two questionnaires of the BALLI and the SILL to discern the underlying factors for beliefs about language learning and language learning strategy items; (2) descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize the participants' responses to the belief and strategy items as well as to the general demographic background questions; (3) Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationships between the emerging belief and strategy factors and to investigate the relationship between the participants' scores on the BALLI and the MJELAB. The qualitative analysis involved a content analysis for recurring themes in students' responses to eleven open-ended questions which were asked to assess their additional beliefs and strategy use. The results of content analysis were mainly used to supplement the statistical results for better interpretation and understanding.

### 3.1. Results of factor analysis on the BALLI and the SILL

The results of factor analysis on BALLI items identified six factors that constitute learners' beliefs about language learning:

1. Beliefs about foreign language aptitude (Items: 1, 2, 6, 10, 11, 19, 30 and 33)
2. Learning and communicative strategies (Items: 7, 9, 13, 18, 22, 26, 31 and 32)
3. Self-efficacy about learning English (Items: 4, 5, 14, 15, 16 and 21)
4. Perceived value of learning English (20, 24 and 29)
5. Beliefs about the nature of language (3, 8, 12 and 27)
6. Beliefs about Formal practices (17, 23, 25, 28 and 34)

The results of factor analysis on SILL items identified seven factors for language learning strategies. The seven factors were:

1. Memory strategies (Items: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9)
2. Cognitive strategies (Items: 7, 8, 10, 11,, 12, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, and 23)
3. Compensation strategies (Items: 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29)
4. Meta-cognitive strategies (Items: 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 37, 38, and 49)
5. Affective strategies (Items: 39, 40, 41, 42, and 43)
6. Social strategies (Items: 35, 45, 46, 47, and 48)
7. Functional-practice strategies (Items: 13, 15, 16, 36, and 50)

### 3.2. Pearson Correlation Analyses

As part of the analyses, the correlations between factors emerging from the analyses of BALLI and SILL data were calculated. Table 1 shows correlations among factors of the BALLI and factors of the SILL.

Table 1: Results of Pearson-correlation between factors of the BALLI and factors of the SILL

	SILL	Memory	Cognitive	Compensatio n	Meta- cognitive	Affective	Social	Functional- practice
BALLI								
Self-efficacy		0.69	0.74	0.70	0.05	0.66	0.68	0.62
Value		0.77	0.71	0.85	0.08	0.72	0.81	0.72
Formal practices		0.21	0.19	0.77-	0.16	0.65-	0.63-	0.89-
Aptitude		0.79	0.71	0.04	0.09	0.08	0.06	0.04
Learning & communication		0.03	0.01	0.64	0.03	0.01	0.006	0.72
Nature		0.75	0.74	0.02	0.04	0.07	0.75	0.02

The result of Pearson-correlation analyses between total scores of the BALLI and MELAB was also calculated to be 0.84 and thus there was strong positive correlation between belief scores and proficiency scores at the 0.05 level. Results revealed that language learners' self-efficacy about learning English and the perceived value of language learning were strongly correlated with their use of all types of language learning strategies except that of meta-cognitive strategies, in which the majority of students were weak. The beliefs about formal practices were likely to discourage the use of compensation, affective, social and especially functional-practice strategies by the language learners. The category of beliefs about foreign language aptitude was positively correlated with memory and cognitive strategies. Besides, learning and communication strategies factor was positively correlated with compensation and functional strategies. In addition, beliefs about the nature of language had positive and significant correlation with memory, cognitive and social strategies.

## 4. Conclusion

The current study was an attempt to investigate the relationships between both EFL learners' beliefs and their strategy use and EFL learners' beliefs and their proficiency level through both quantitative and qualitative data in Iran. Based on results reported, Iranian EFL learners' beliefs affected their language learning strategy use and

language proficiency. The work indicated that learner beliefs can be strong mediating factors in experiences in the classroom. Kern (1995, P. 81) proposes that students are frustrated when classroom methods do not match their expectations and the result confirm this. McCargar (1993, pp. 200-1) suggests that frustrated learners may quit a course and look for one that better meets their needs and wishes. The gap between teacher and learner beliefs results in negative learning outcomes for the learners; leads to reduced learner confidence in and satisfaction with the class; and leads to a reluctance to participate in communicative activities in the class. So teachers should explain the reasoning behind classroom methods, to reduce any gap between learner and teacher beliefs. Students' beliefs are sometimes "truly detrimental to successful language learning". On the other hand, eliminating erroneous learner beliefs is problematical. Kern (1995) reports that learner beliefs changed very little over one semester and were "well entrenched" (pp. 78-81). Thus, one of language teachers' important duties may be to try to foster positive beliefs and minimize negative beliefs that inhibit learning. Teachers can remove students' misconceptions by providing knowledge or illustrations concerning the nature and process of second language acquisition.

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